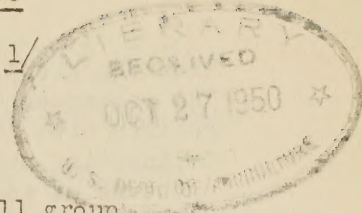


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Report on Field Study of FSA Community and Cooperative

Service Program, Bradley County, Arkansas, August 1942, 1/

Summary



Group discussion of needs has preceded the setting-up of all group services established in Bradley County, Ark. since March 1942. Group discussion has contributed to farmers' appreciation of what they can hope to achieve cooperatively. The decision, however, of farmers to own facilities jointly was predetermined by the fact that farmers knew that FSA would make loans only on a joint-ownership basis. Bradley County has only 12 active discussion groups, though 36 were originally planned. Failure to follow the concept of natural neighborhoods and the problem of bringing together enough FSA borrowers to organize a discussion group explain why more discussion groups have not been set up. Nine discussion groups have been successful in terms of organizing a group service. Factors contributing to the success of these groups included (1) the efforts of the farm supervisor, (2) adherence to the concept of natural groups, and (3) the support of non-FSA families. Group-ownership services have not been in operation long enough to judge of their success. Master-borrower services, all of which have operated for 18 months or more, have not been used to the extent planned and, in general, they have tended to serve the large farmer rather than the small one. Several master-borrower services are operating uneconomic facilities. The great majority of farmers participating in group services are non-FSA farmers. FSA families participating in group services represent only about one-fifth of all FSA farmers. Generally speaking, participants in group-ownership services are "sold" on the idea of joint-ownership. Group services themselves have not increased the social participation of the low-income farmer, but discussion groups have.

Group Discussion and C & CS

The principle that community and cooperative services should evolve as a social process born in and nurtured by neighborhood discussion groups have guided the FSA farm supervisor in organizing all group services established since March 1942. Accordingly, of the five group-ownership services created since that date, none was organized before farmers had met three or four times to determine their needs and to discuss ways and means of meeting them. Theoretically, out of the neighborhood discussions came the decision that joint-ownership is the solution to the problem of acquiring facilities that no one farmer could afford to buy alone. Actually, however, this decision was predetermined by the fact that the discussion leaders and most of the participating farmers were aware from the start that FSA loans could be obtained for certain facilities but only if farmers were willing to own them jointly. This is not to say that the discussion groups were a mere formality. Unquestionably they contributed to an understanding of what farmers can hope to achieve cooperatively, and this fact may well be an important element in the future success of the services established.

When the group discussion program was initiated in Bradley County, the FSA personnel mapped 36 neighborhoods, the boundaries of which were later refined with the assistance of the Rural Rehabilitation Committee. In delineating neighborhoods, the attempt was made to follow existing patterns of social relationships, but it was not always successful for reasons stated later.

The original plan was to organize a discussion group in each of the neighborhoods delineated, and to this end a leader, subject later to election by his group, was appointed for each neighborhood. Of the 36 neighborhoods, only 24 were represented at the meeting called by the supervisor for the purpose of presenting the plan for organizing discussion groups. There is no record of how many leaders actually organized the farmers of their respective neighborhoods. Currently, however, there are 15 groups, though only 12 of these are active. On the basis of regular meetings and of interest in the discussion program, 10 of the 12 groups are strong and 2 are weak.

A discussion group is essentially a discussion group for action, and only as the members of such a group take positive action, whether individually or collectively, to solve the problems they discuss, can such a group be called successful.

Not only is action a measure of the success of a discussion group, but it is also the life-blood of such a group. Without the hope of acting to solve their problems, it is highly questionable whether farmers could have been stimulated to form groups for the purpose of discussing their problems. To the fact that FSA, through its lending power, offers discussion groups the opportunity to translate talk into action must be attributed a large share of the success of these groups.

The leadership given to the nine groups by the supervisor was another highly important factor contributing to success. The supervisor worked intensively with each of the nine groups. The importance of his participation at the neighborhood level cannot be overemphasized. The initial success of a leader in organizing and holding a group together must shortly be supplemented by assistance from the farm supervisor. Almost immediately in group discussions arise questions of "Why?" and of "How?" Few leaders have the knowledge and experience necessary to answer these questions, but the supervisor does have, and unless his assistance is forthcoming at this critical stage his program will come to naught. It is almost certain that several groups which are now crying for the supervisor's leadership and direction will soon disband if they do not get them. Once a month the farm supervisor holds a meeting of neighborhood discussion leaders - white and negro - and at this meeting the supervisor explains developments in the FSA program and discusses farm problems with the leaders. As important as this is, it falls far short of supplying what the supervisor can give through participating in neighborhood meetings. Nothing that has been said should be interpreted to mean that FSA must play nursemaid to discussion groups. Groups clearly

do not want to be told what to do or not to do, but they do want knowledge and advice. Essentially the role of the farm supervisor must be a dual one - he must be an adult education teacher and a business advisor.

Considering how closely the supervisor has had to work with each group, it is obvious why he has not worked with more groups than he has. Responsible for all phases of the FSA program, he clearly cannot devote his entire energies to any one phase. For the most part, the supervisor has apparently worked with neighborhoods which have shown the greatest interest in the discussion program and which gave promise of organizing a community and cooperative service immediately. Aware that one of his jobs is to establish group services, it was only natural for him to work with such groups first.

All of the active discussion groups draw their members from neighborhoods which conform to the natural neighborhood grouping of farm families, and this accounts for part of what success these groups have had. As stated elsewhere, an attempt was made to follow the concept of natural groups in delineating neighborhoods. That the attempt was not successful in every instance was due in part to the problem of bringing together enough FSA borrowers to form discussion groups in sections of the county where borrowers live rather far apart and in part to an uncertainty as to the location of natural neighborhood lines. But whatever the reason, the failure to observe the concept of natural groups is one reason why some leaders have never been able to organize the farmers of their respective "neighborhoods," and until these neighborhood lines are redrawn to conform to existing patterns of social relationships it is not likely that successful discussion groups will be developed.

The support of non-FSA families was one factor enabling discussion groups to establish community and cooperative services. In fact, it is unlikely that some of the services would have been organized had not such families participated. Altogether, the five services which developed out of discussion groups have 41 different joint-owners, 16 of whom are non-FSA farmers. The role of non-FSA farmers is even more evident from the fact that they constitute somewhat more than half of all the farmers who signed participation agreements. Not all of the non-FSA farmers who signed agreements actually participated in the discussion meetings, but many of them did. In general, most of the non-FSA farmers participating in the discussion meetings are low-income farmers, but there are some who have a relatively high economic status. If one aim of the group discussion program is the integration of the low-income farmer into the life of the neighborhood and community, then some attention should be given to the problem of enlisting the active support of all farmers regardless of economic status. And this should be done immediately, for otherwise there is danger that the discussion group will come to be recognized, both by themselves and by others, as simply an organization of low-income farmers.

Participation of tenants in the group-discussion program is closely related to security of tenure. Several neighborhood leaders stressed insecurity of tenure as one reason why some tenants will not attend group-

discussion meetings. Apparently the problem of obtaining written leases for tenants is greater in some neighborhoods than in others, for nearly half of all FSA borrowers have written leases, and most of these leases run for a period of 5 years or longer.

Reference has been made to the fact that the farm supervisor holds a monthly meeting of neighborhood leaders. It is held at the FSA office at Warren, and for leaders living close by this arrangement is highly satisfactory. But many leaders live at a considerable distance from the office, and they find it quite a problem to attend, even once a month. Admittedly it would place an additional burden on the farm supervisor, but if the county were divided into two or three sections, and a monthly meeting held in each, many leaders who are not now participating would probably be drawn into the program and those who are participating would probably attend oftener. The value of county-wide meetings of leaders could be retained by holding such meetings quarterly.

An interesting feature of the discussion program is the way in which white and Negro farmers have worked together in one neighborhood. This is especially interesting because in some sections of the county Negroes are not permitted, even as day laborers. In this particular neighborhood there is a white discussion group and a Negro one. These two groups hold separate meetings, but several members of the white group met with the Negro group when it was proposed to organize community and cooperative services, and with the result that two services were organized, each of which has both whites and Negroes as joint owners.

This treatment of discussion groups and C & CS would be incomplete without a reference to the Farmers' Union. In some neighborhoods discussion groups and the Farmers' Union are so closely identified that "it is difficult to tell whether you are going to a discussion meeting or to a Farmers' Union meeting." Interest in the Farmers' Union is surging, and virtually every farmer - white and Negro - who was interviewed had recently become a member. Interest in the Farm Bureau, on the other hand, was nil, at least among the farmers interviewed with the exception of one well-to-do owner. In fact, low-income farmers look upon the Farm Bureau as an organization inimical to their welfare. Early in the year the Farm Bureau held a county-wide meeting at which FSA was sharply criticized. This criticism was resented by FSA borrowers who attended, and according to several borrowers, "not many of us ever attended another meeting." Interesting, too, is the fact that both the president and vice-president of the county-wide Farmers' Union are FSA borrowers.

Success of Group Services

Eighteen community and cooperative services--11 master-borrower and 7 group ownership--have been established in Bradley County, and all but 3 master-borrower services were in operation in August 1942. These services operated 9 types of facilities, including 5 bulls, 2 jacks,

4 mowers, 4 rakes, 2 tractors, 2 combines, 2 hay balers, 2 pea threshers, and a syrup mill. Eight groups are operating one or more machinery facilities, 5 are operating only a sice service, and 2, both machinery and sice services.

Services of the group-ownership type had not yet operated long enough to measure their success. Of those organized since March 1942, when the discussion program was initiated, none had been active for more than about 3 months, and the two organized before that date had been active only about 9 months.

All of the active master-borrower services had been in operation for 18 months or more, and several of them, 23 months or more. Unfortunately, borrowers have not kept complete records on their operations, and some of them have kept no records. The only statistical measure of success is that of loan repayments. Of the eight active services, five were current and 3 were delinquent, though only one of the delinquent borrowers had not repaid something on his loan. But although statistical data are lacking, interviews with borrowers and with participants give a picture of how the services have operated.

Master-borrower services have not been used as intensively as was originally planned. In the instance, however, of the sice services and the tractor-combine-disk services, the difference between the number of units of service actually used and those planned was not great. Mower-rake and pea-thresher services, on the other hand, fell far short of the planned goals. Within recent years, farmers have been encouraged to produce more hay for farm consumption, and it was on the basis of enabling farmers to do this that the economic justifications for mowers and rakes were founded. What the economic justifications apparently did not take into consideration was the fact that much of the land to be planted to hay by the Negroes who were to use these facilities was not sufficiently cleared to permit the use of mowers. This explains why both mower services have failed to measure up to expectations. The pea threshers are used by almost no one but the master-borrowers themselves. These machines, operated by hand and having a capacity of only 8 bushels per day, have been found by the borrowers to be too small to justify the labor involved in operating them.

Master-borrowers operating tractor-combine-disk services have tended to serve the larger farmer rather than the smaller one. This was particularly true of one master-borrower who has operated rather widely outside his own neighborhood, and in sections where there are some relatively large farms. There are two reasons why this has happened. In the first place, some of the farmers who agreed to use the master-borrower's facilities have never requested them. In the second place, the master-borrower finds it more profitable to use his equipment on large farms rather than on small ones. In 1942, this farmer combined 90 acres for 4 non-low-income farmers, only one of whom had signed the participation agreement. This number of acres represented nearly 60 percent of the total acreage established for the service.

A competent manager is a prerequisite to the success of any group service. Apparently, the managers of the services operating in Bradley County are capable, though in the case of those of the recently organized group-ownership services it is too early to judge definitely. As indicative of the capabilities and of the probable success of the managers, several facts are striking. For one thing, all but one are owners, though not all own their land outright. Generally speaking, owners in Bradley County are recognized as having more managerial ability than tenants. Then most of the managers were not FSA borrowers at the time their respective services were organized. In fact, of the 15 managers, 10 were non-FSA farmers. All but one of the managers are classified as low-income farmers, but most of them, particularly the white managers, are what might be termed "upper low-income farmers." Another striking feature is that many of the managers had had previous experience with the type of facilities they were operating. In a number of cases, particularly those of master-borrower services, economic justifications written to support request for loans stressed the experience that prospective managers had had, and part of the success predicted for such services was based on this fact.

Participation in Group Services

The great majority of farmers participating in group services are non-FSA farmers. Most of the non-FSA farmers are low-income farmers, though some are definitely above the low-income class. Altogether, 230 different farmers, including those who obtained a C & CS loan, signed participation agreements. Of all farmers signing, only 68, or about 30 percent, were drawn from the rural rehabilitation program. These 68 farmers represent only about one-fifth of all FSA borrowers. Other group services scheduled for operation within a short time will increase this proportion somewhat, but even so, the great majority of FSA farmers will remain outside the C & CS program. The count of FSA farmers participating in group services includes only those who signed participating agreements. It is known that some FSA farmers who did not sign are nevertheless using group-service facilities, but the number of such farmers is small.

Nearly half of the FSA farmers participating in group services are owners. Considering, however, that nearly four-fifths of all the farm operators in Bradley County in 1940, were owners, it was to be expected that a large proportion of all participants would be owners. Share tenants (24) and cash renters (12) make up the other FSA farmers who are taking part in the program.

The relatively small number of FSA borrowers who are participants in group services seemingly has several explanations. One explanation is that many FSA farmers do not need the facilities that have been established, though unquestionably there are farmers who do need them. The facilities that have been bought are directed toward accomplishing several things: 1) toward getting farmers to raise their own workstock, thereby saving the money expended annually to replace workstock;

2) toward production of more and better milk cows by breeding to blooded bulls of the milk type; 3) toward production and conservation of more hay, thereby reducing the cash outlay for feed; 4) toward soil improvement; and 5) toward less dependence upon cotton, the principal cash crop at present.

As sound and as praiseworthy as these goals are, many FSA farmers cannot hope to achieve them under existing conditions. The small success of two mower services is one case in point. Poor land and insufficient land prevent many farmers from making any additional effort to produce and conserve more hay. Most FSA borrowers do not have mares, and even if they wanted to own them, inadequate pasture would prevent them.

A slowness to realize that they could improve their economic status by shifting from exclusive dependence upon cotton, and that the facilities established by FSA could assist them in making the change, explains why some farmers are not using group services. In part, of course, the continued dependence upon cotton is due to the fact that many farmers, for reasons already stated, could not make the shift even though they should recognize that it would be to their advantage to do so. In educating farmers as to the need for diversifying their farming, the group discussion program can play an important part, and in at least one neighborhood the attempt is being made.

Master-borrowers tend to serve the large farmer rather than the small one because the guiding motive is economic gain rather than service, and this explains, in some degree, why more FSA farmers are not using the services established. Group-ownership service, particularly where ownership is rather widely diffused, should tend to serve a greater proportion of small farmers because the spirit of service to all, backed by group control, will govern the use of facilities. Here again, the group-discussion program has an important part to play, but it must be recognized that this program cannot be expected to achieve results overnight.

The C & CS program is, of course, a recent development, and this is particularly true of the group-ownership phase. It is too much to expect that services, especially if they are to be soundly grounded, can be developed everywhere at once. In part, therefore, the participation of more FSA borrowers in group services awaits further development of the program.

Supervision of Group Services

Virtually no supervision has been given to the operation of group services. The explanation is that none has been necessary. After all, the facilities in use are relatively simple to operate, and a capable farmer can manage without assistance. Group-ownership services have not, of course, operated very long, but so far they have functioned smoothly. Several managers of group-ownership services said that there have been disagreements over the use of facilities, but none of these, they said, have been more than minor in character.

Attitudes Toward C & CS

The FSA farm supervisor in Bradley County is convinced of the value of community and cooperative services, and he is attempting to put his program across in accordance with sound principles of community action. He has a thorough understanding of his program and of what he hopes to accomplish. He also is fully cognizant of the problems.

Cooperation among farmers was not practiced before the time that FSA inaugurated its C and CS program. Informal cooperation, as exemplified by swapping labor, was not general, though it did exist in earlier times, and older farmers recalled the fact. As even now, farmers assisted a neighbor who was in a "tight" but continuing informal cooperation did not exist. Nor have formal cooperatives met with more than temporary success. The two or three that were organized failed after operating only a relatively short time. The latest attempt at a cooperative organization was a Truck Growers' Association, established in the 1930's.

The C & CS program has fostered a genuine belief in the idea that many of the problems facing farmers can be solved only through cooperation. At the same time, it should be recognized that at least some of the belief in and enthusiasm for cooperative action stems from the war effort and from the organizational activities of the Farmers' Union. But in any event, participants in group services are "sold" on the principle of cooperation, and they are convinced that joint-ownership of facilities is not only feasible but is the only way of acquiring what they need to improve their economic condition. Not every one of them, however. A few farmers who were participating as joint-owners clearly felt that the master-borrower arrangement is preferable to group ownership. Generally, this feeling was based on the conviction that "too many cooks spoil the broth." A few farmers hold that group ownership is practicable but only if there are no more than three to five owners. The five recently organized group-ownership services average 9 owners.

Until recently, the county agent gave strong support to the C & CS program. He was active in helping to organize services, and he wrote a number of economic justifications in support of them. Most of the services which the county agent assisted in establishing were of the master-borrower type, but two of them were group-ownership services, and at the time he assisted in organizing these two groups he apparently felt that the idea of group ownership was sound, judging from what he wrote in recommendation of them. But whether he ever believed in group ownership, currently his attitude is that it is not worth while. The personal relationship between the FSA supervisor and the county agent is excellent, and the latter is quoted as saying that he "regretted that this whole thing developed."

Generally speaking, farmers above the low-income class seemingly approve of the C & CS program. A number of such farmers are participating in group services, some of them as owners. The few non-low-income farmers

who were interviewed approved of the program, and these were of the opinion that most farmers of their class also approve.

County-wide FSA Cooperatives

Three county-wide cooperatives are sponsored by FSA: A purchasing and marketing association, a medical and health association, and a veterinarian association. Roughly, 90 percent of all FSA families hold membership in both the medical and health association and the purchasing and marketing association. Only about half of all families are members of the veterinarian association.

Although some families prefer to run the risk of doctors' bills rather than to insure themselves against them, most families feel that the medical and health association is one of the best projects ever sponsored by FSA, and all interviewed members expressed complete satisfaction with the way it has operated.

The P & M Association has been functioning for several years, but it can hardly be termed very successful. So far, activities of the enterprise have been limited to purchasing commodities. Items purchased have included fertilizer, cotton seed, garden seed, pressure cookers, fruit jars, and kitchen utensil kits.

The officers and the board of directors of the P & M Association have played only a nominal part in managing the association. The farm supervisor has had to manage the business for the reason that there has been no one else who could handle it.

Interest in the P and M Association is apparently higher at the moment than at any time since the organization was set up. Recently it has been proposed to open membership in the organization to non-FSA farmers, and the possibility of having an association embracing all farmers in the county has quickened interest in cooperative buying and selling.

An educational program on cooperative purchasing and marketing is urgently needed. Most farmers have grasped some of the general principles involved, but they know almost nothing of how a P and M Association actually operates. That the P and M Association has not enjoyed more success than it has must be attributed to the fact that farmers have not had a clear and complete understanding of it. Unless farmers are fully informed, it is a safe prediction that the present effort to expand the association will not result in more than temporary success.

Social Participation and Social Rehabilitation

Objectives of the FSA program include not only the economic rehabilitation but also the social rehabilitation of the low-income farmer. In evaluating the progress of the low-income farmer toward social rehabilitation, it should be borne in mind that the social rehabilitation process

is a long-time one, and it is too much to expect that the desired end will be achieved within the space of a few months, or even a few years.

One step toward social rehabilitation is increased participation in the social and institutional life of the neighborhood and community. Discussion groups have accomplished something in the direction, but group services have not. As stated earlier, the possibility of organizing a service was a factor, and probably the most important one, in inducing farmers to meet together, but once a service was organized it became, in effect, finished business. Simple group services, such as those established in Bradley County, do not in and of themselves provide social participation. After all, the fact of owning together a simple piece of machinery, such as a rake, is not of itself something to arouse farmers to further activity. Successful ownership together of one facility may stimulate farmers to buy another facility together, but beyond that it is not likely to go.

Discussion groups are of a different category, and chiefly because of the reason for their being. They are not organized simply to establish a group service, though unquestionably this was a prime factor activating them originally, but to discover neighborhood problems and to determine upon ways and means of solving them. Thus, the organization of a group service becomes only one of the things a discussion group seeks to accomplish. If this broad viewpoint is maintained, and it is being held in the instance of the strong discussion groups, then almost inevitably the discussion group will make for greater participation of the individual in the life of his neighborhood and community.

Discussion groups have already achieved something in terms of fostering social participation. One Negro group, for example, has secured a rather wide participation in its meetings by making the discussion group something of a social club that will satisfy recreational needs, especially those of the youth of the neighborhood. This group is centering its energies around a program of diversified farming. One white group has developed plans for a Sunday School and church, and is talking of constructing a church building that will also serve as a community house. Another group has developed plans for constructing a dipping vat, most of the money for which has already been subscribed.

Activities such as those described tend to integrate the participating individual into the life of the neighborhood and thereby destroy the handicap that derives from his social isolation. But this fact must be recognized: A discussion group seldom is the neighborhood. Most discussion groups have so far touched only a segment of their respective neighborhoods. Class differences exist, and they constitute a real barrier to the complete integration of a neighborhood, though this is truer of whites than of Negroes.

Liquidated Services

Three master-borrower services have been liquidated, or are in the process of being liquidated. In one instance, the facility - a bull - proved unsatisfactory and was therefore sold. In the case of the other two services, one borrower died and one moved from the county.

